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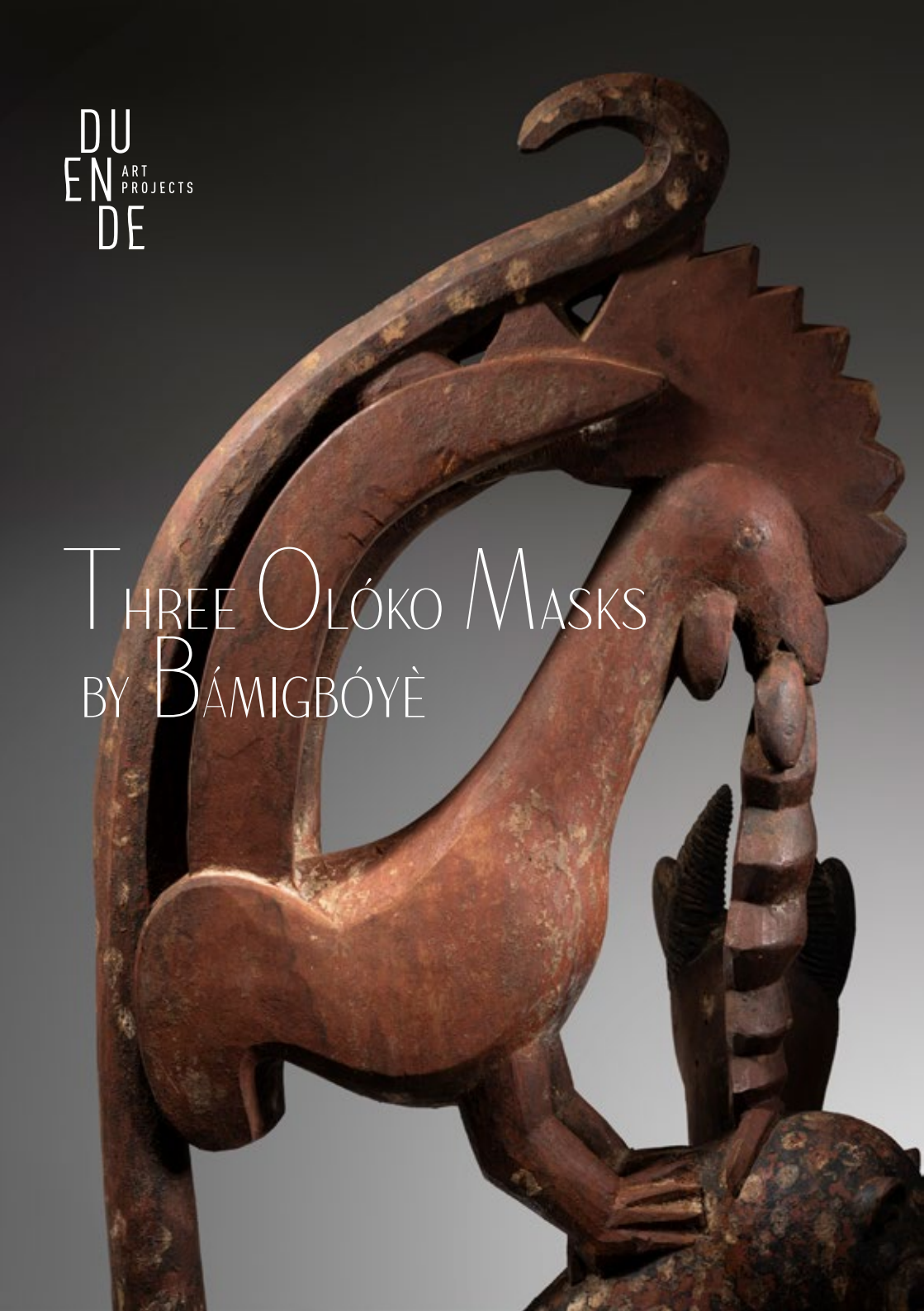
ART PROJECTS

Three Olóko Masks by Bámigbóyè

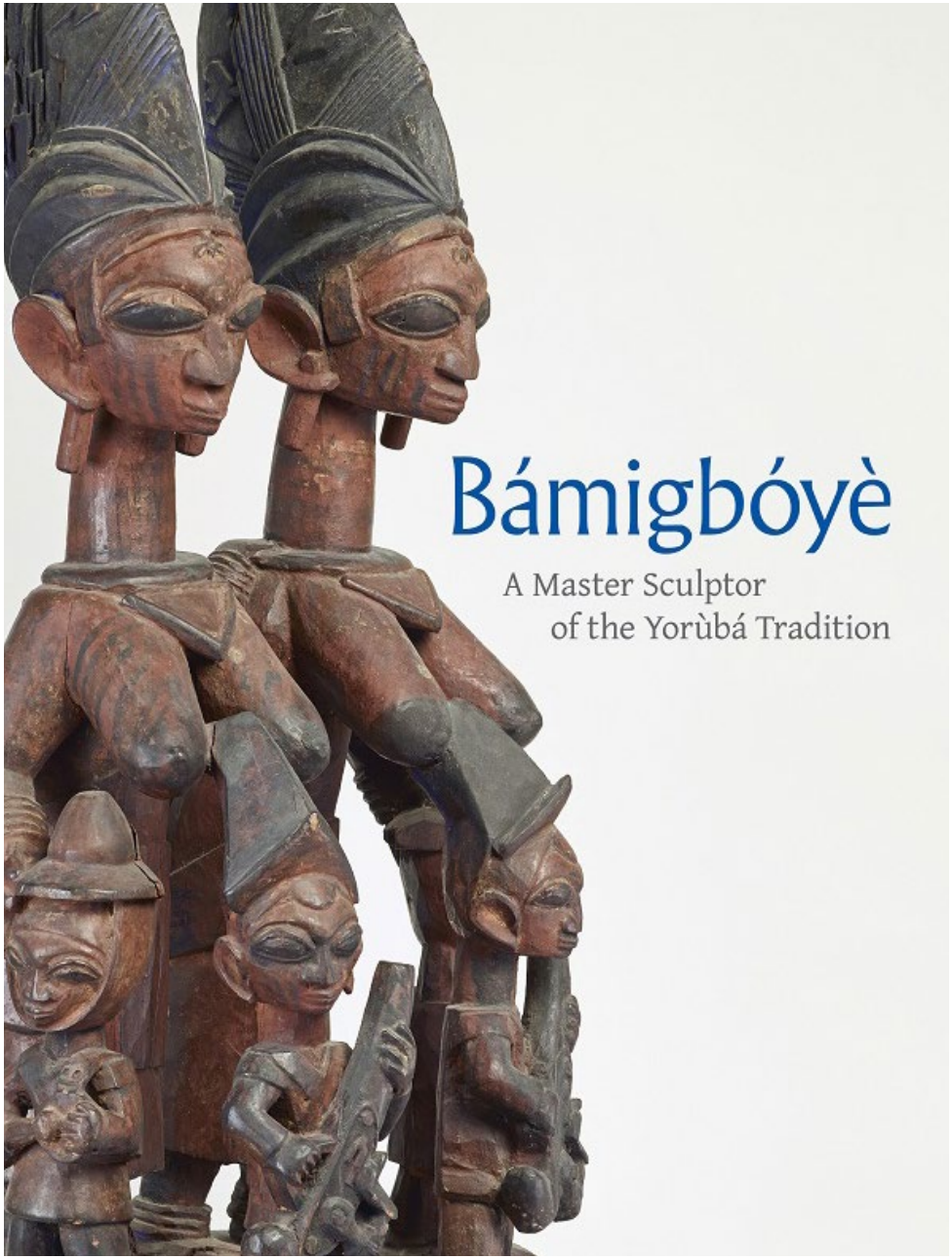


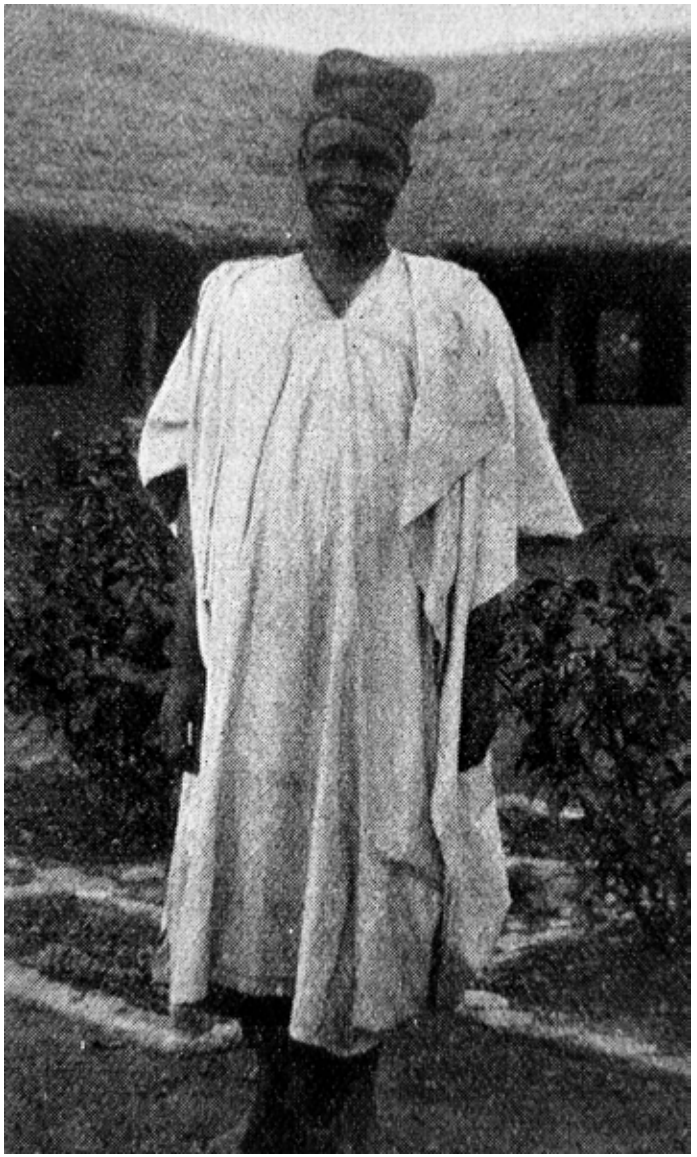
Bámigbóyè

A Yoruba Sculptor Beyond Compare

Among the most celebrated Yoruba sculptors of the twentieth century, Moshood Olusomo Bámigbóyè was born in Kajola, in the present-day Kwara State in Nigeria, around 1885. He maintained a prolific and respected workshop from the 1920s until his death in 1975. While working within the long-established Yoruba tradition of woodcarving, he developed a sculptural language that was unmistakably his own. From 9 September 2022 until8 January 2023, the Yale University Art Gallery hosted the first-ever exhibition about Bámigbóyè, curated by James Green. Apart from Roslyn Walker's exhibition about Olowe of Ise at the National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, in 1998, it was one of the first solo exhibitions about a single classical African artist. Placed centrally in the exhibition galleries, it displayed six helmet masks for the *Epa* festival - the sculptural form most closely associated with his practice that brought Bámigbóyè local and international fame. The catalog for this exhibition formed the basis for the following biographic text.

Bámigbóyè belonged to a generation of Ekiti Yoruba carvers who came of age during the early decades of British colonial occupation, formally established in 1900. This period was marked by the dismantling of older political structures, the introduction of colonial administration, and increasing engagement with outside audiences. Rather than retreating from these changes, Bámigbóyè engaged them selectively. From his workshop in Kajola, he produced works for traditional patrons such as priests, chiefs, and rulers, while also fulfilling commissions for British colonial officials and, later, for members of the political and cultural elite of an independent Nigeria.





Bámigbóyè as a young man at the Omu School in Omu-Aran, photographed by John Digby Clarke circa 1934.

By the 1930s, Bámigbóyè had already attracted the attention of British colonial administrators. One of them, the education officer John Digby Clarke, employed him to teach woodcarving at a local school in Omu (present-day Omu-Aran), several kilometers south of Kajola. Around this time, his work began to circulate beyond its immediate ritual context. From the late 1930s onward, sculptures by Bámigbóyè were exhibited internationally and entered museum collections in Nigeria, Europe, and the United States. By the time of Nigerian independence in 1960, he was widely revered as one of the greatest living Yoruba carvers.

This growing recognition did not alter Bámigbóyè's self-presentation so much as it amplified it. He received foreign visitors at his workshop, posed for portraits, and gave interviews—translated from his Ekiti dialect of Yoruba into English by his representative, Chief M. O. Ashaolu, the community leader of Kajola. In these exchanges, he responded generously to questions about his craft, while maintaining a firm sense of autonomy and authority over his work and knowledge. Despite his fame, Bámigbóyè never learned, or perhaps chose not to speak, English. He maintained a cautious distance from foreign visitors. At the same time, he was remembered for his generosity, often responding to questions of price with the words, "Whatever you have."

According to his descendants, including his son Abdulazeez Olatoye Bámigbóyè, his abilities as both sculptor and healer were understood as a "gift from God." Throughout his life, he sought to cultivate this gift through honorable work, which he regarded as a form of devotion. He understood his artistic and healing practices as ways of appealing to the gods and ancestral forces of the invisible world. Through this work, he aimed to protect his family and clients from witchcraft and malevolent forces, to heal the afflicted, and to "restore the destinies of those who were less fortunate." In doing so, he sought to increase his ase, the vital spiritual force that animates all existence in Yoruba thought, and to establish himself as a powerful ancestor whose influence would continue to sustain social order and stability in Kajola.

Bámigbóyè photographed by
Marshall W. Mount in August 1961.

Bámigbóyè's artistic skills impressed early colonial observers. Kenneth C. Murray, Nigeria's first Surveyor of Antiquities and later Director of the Federal Department of Antiquities, interviewed the artist around 1935 and remarked on the grace and ease with which he carved. Murray observed that the sculptor used his entire arm in a fluid motion, drawing the knife toward his thumb at a consistent angle to produce sharp, V-shaped cuts, particularly when executing geometric patterns. He was struck by the absence of preparatory sketches: Bámigbóyè worked directly into the wood. Samuel Babatunde Bámigbóyè, the artist's stepson and apprentice, later recalled that his master employed eleven different knives, each custom-commissioned from a blacksmith, during the different stages of sculpting.

Family tradition situates the origins of this mastery in childhood. According to legend, Bámigbóyè was around seven years old when his father noticed him skillfully cutting banana leaves and recognized that, although he was expected to become a farmer, his destiny lay elsewhere. Although the identity of his master is not recorded, and his descendants claim he had no teacher, Bámigbóyè himself acknowledged that it took him ten years to fully learn his craft. Apprenticeship involved years of tool maintenance, wood preparation, and observation, as well as the acquisition of specialized knowledge about different types of wood, knowledge regarded as part of a sculptor's expertise.

Woodcarving was a viable and respected profession in early twentieth-century Yorubaland, particularly in the period of relative peace following the end of the Yoruba civil wars in 1893. Sculptors worked for priests and rulers, the most powerful figures in society, and were compensated with goods, services, and social privileges. They were exempt from certain communal obligations and enjoyed special status at court. Because they produced works for shrines dedicated to the gods or *orisa*, they were also admitted into secret cults. Born into a noble family, Bámigbóyè further elevated his status through his carving.

Map of the Yoruba region, situating Kajola in the Ekiti region (published in Green, op. cit., p. 15)

After leaving his teaching post in Omu in 1945, Bámigbóyè continued his work as sculptor and healer in Kajola. Over the following decades, he was visited by many of the most influential figures in the field of African art: Leon Underwood, William Fagg, John Danford, Ian Brinkworth, Ulli Beier, Marshall W. Mount, Eliot Elisofon, John Pemberton III, Robert Farris Thompson, and Daniel P. Biebuyck among them. Sculptures acquired directly from his workshop now reside in major public and private collections worldwide.

As a renowned healer, it was said that Bámigbóyè possessed "a power that permitted him to divine what was wrong just by looking at the palm of the hand." He cured physical ailments ranging from skin diseases and broken bones to attacks by evil forces, and he was especially celebrated for his ability to promote fertility. Patients were brought to him from near and far, and he healed without taking money. His combined authority as sculptor and healer led to further civic responsibilities: appointment to the local court, presidency of the Ilofa Native Court in 1963, and service on the Ilorin Native Council representing the Ekiti region. Around 1967, Bámigbóyè converted to Islam, taking the name Moshood, and went on to practice a religion that was syncretic, combining Islam with traditional beliefs. He participated in Islamic festivals as he had long done in *Epa* and *Are* celebrations, presenting a large white ram at Id-el-Kabir, and welcomed Muslims to pray at his home. Until his death, he continued to carve daily, rising before dawn to wake his wives for prayer

A studio portrait taken in the early 1970s and intended for display in his home captures how Bámigbóyè wished to be seen. Dressed in fine robes and holding a horse-tail fly whisk in his right hand, he presents himself as both sculptor and ruler. The fly whisk signals his role as *Edemorun*, ruler of Kajola, a position he assumed in 1963. From the 1950s onward, he also served as chief herbalist of the *Egbe Onisegun*, a Yoruba cult of herbalists dedicated to healing. Today, the photograph is preserved in the family compound of his last surviving wife, Felicia Aribake Bámigbóyè. Fifty years after his death, the artist is still remembered for his skill as a sculptor, his renown as chief herbalist and diviner, and his role as a judge on the local court.

Epa mask made by Moshood Olusomo Bámigbóyè. Photography by William Buller Fagg. Collection William Buller Fagg Library, Royal Anthropological Institute, London (545.WBF.49.50.46.4). Published in Green (James), op. cit. , p. 105, fig. 105. This famous mask is now in the British Museum (Af1953.17.26).

The Monumental Helmet Masks Of The Epa Festival: An Introduction

While Bámigbóyè produced various types of sculptures for the ritual and social needs of his own family and the towns closest to Kajola, a substantial part of his practice was devoted to commissions for the most important festival of the region: the *Epa* festival. Celebrated annually, with a more elaborate iteration every other year, *Epa* took place between March and May and was often hosted in rapid succession by different town quarters or family compounds. The festival sought to secure fertility, agricultural abundance, and the continued moral and social stability of the community. Contemporary records underline the intensity of this ritual calendar: in 1934 alone, four separate *Epa* festivals were documented in the vicinity of Kajola within a period of two months.

The visual and performative center of each festival was the appearance of a series of monumental masks distinguished by complex figurative superstructures. These sculptures could reach heights of up to 150 centimetres and weigh as much as 40 kilograms, demanding both physical endurance from the dancer and technical mastery from the sculptor. Each mask articulated a distinct theme understood to be essential to the orderly functioning of society - fertility, leadership, protection, lineage, or historical authority - so that the festival became a cumulative display of a community's social values.

Accounts of the origins and meaning of *Epa* differ from one community to another. In Omu (today part of Omu-Aran), members of the Ora family compound recalled that the tradition came from Ile-Ife and centered on the worship of *Epa* as the principal orisa of their community, a force believed to bring children, prosperity, and good fortune. Another account described *Epa* not as a deity but as a deified ancestor: a great woodcarver whose ongoing guardianship ensured the well-being of his descendants.

Formally, *Epa* masks are carved from a single block of wood and structured around two distinct registers. The lower portion, worn over the dancer's head, is a roughly carved, helmet-like base with eye holes and two faces - one facing forward and one backward, often likened to an inverted pot (known as ikoko). Robert Farris Thompson described this face as bearing "the enormous eyes and exaggerated open mouth of an ancestor," evoking the orisa who once "walked the earth as giants" and upon whom the living continue to depend. This janus-like base is associated with the otherworld (orun) and serves as a base for the superstructure above, which represents the realm of the living (ayé). While the base remains relatively consistent in form, the superstructure varies and may be devoted to one of several types, including *Oloko* (leopard), *Abiyamo* (mother with children), *Ija'beji* (mother of twins), and equestrian figures representing war chiefs (Balogun) and rulers (*Oba*).

An *Epa* festival could feature as many as forty masks, each belonging to a different family compound and commissioned according to specific ritual and social requirements. In the region surrounding Kajola, such commissions provided Bámigbóyè and other sculptors with sustained work and, equally important, a public arena in which to demonstrate their talent. In the weeks leading up to a festival, masks were frequently borrowed from

In August 1961, New York University professor Marshall W. Mount visited Bámigbóyè and photographed this mask in the artist's workshop, polychromed with fresh pigment. Bámigbóyè informed Mount that it took between three and five months to finish an Epa mask of this scale, and that he generally used a wood called erinmodo, likely Ricinodendron heudelotii. He stressed to Mount that his ability to carve was "a gift from God" and noted that 'no one living could do work like this, not even in England". This mask was called "Atofojowo" ("You can look at It for a Whole Day) and presently his held by the Newark Museum of Art. (Green, op. cit., p. 115).

Performance of Oloju Foforo ("Owner of the Deep-Set Eyes) by Francis Owolabi Bámidele during an Epa Festival, Kajola, Kwara State, Nigeria, February 2020. Photography by Nguveren Torkwase Olufunto Ahua. (Green, op. cit., p. 96). The third mask in the procession features a similar dog as its superstructure.

neighboring villages to augment the host compound's display, resulting in performances that brought together works by multiple sculptors within a single event.

As chief herbalist, Bámigbóyè safeguarded his community's masks when they were not in performance. The most powerful *Epa* mask, the Oloko, featuring a leopard, was kept in a dedicated shrine and received regular sacrifices. Other masks were stored in the rafters above a fire to protect them from insects. They were meticulously maintained: always covered with cloths, shielded from dust, rodents, and refurbished whenever their surfaces showed signs of fading. Before each performance, Bámigbóyè washed, repainted, and ritually prepared them.

Epa masks functioned not merely as sculptural achievements, but as instruments through which a community's aspirations for fertility, continuity, and order were repeatedly renewed. Bámigbóyè was one of the most accomplished and prolific carvers of *Epa* masks, producing dozens of works for festival performance over the course of his long career.

Olóko

Epa's principal mask

In the Ekìtì towns of northeastern Yorubaland, such as Kajola, the principal mask performed during the annual Epa festival was *Oloko*. The *Oloko* mask is characterized by the presence of a leopard (*ekun*), yet Bámigbóyè's interpretations of the type extend beyond this singular motif. In his masks, the leopard is accompanied by several other animals: an antelope positioned beneath it, and a rooster holding a snake in its beak standing atop the leopard's back. In the exhibition catalog from 2022, James Green published two examples sculpted by Bámigbóyè. The earlier mask, thought to have been carved between about 1920 and 1940, entered the collection of the National Museum, Lagos, in the early 1950s. A second *Oloko*, sculpted around 1952, was commissioned directly from the artist by John Danford and is now conserved in the Danford Collection of West African Art and Artefacts at the University of Birmingham. According to Green, a third *Oloko* mask remains in the possession of the artist's descendants and was last performed in Kajola in February 2020. The three masks presented in this catalog thus constitute an important addition to the small corpus of *Oloko* masks that can be attributed to Bámigbóyè.

Of the documented examples, the *Oloko* now in Lagos is the earliest to enter a public collection. In 1943,

Oloko Mask for an Epa festival with a superstructure depicting a leopard, an antelope, a rooster, and a snake. Made by Moshood Olusomo Bámigbóyè. Photography by William Buller Fagg. Collection William Buller Fagg Library, Royal Anthropological Institute, London (514. WBF.49.50.46.9). Published in Green (James), "Bámigbóyè: A Master Sculptor of the Yorûbá Tradition", New Haven, Yale University Press, 2022, p. 177, fig. 109.

Left: the Oloko mask from Danford Collection of West African Art and Artefacts, University of Birmingham, United Kingdom (#BIRRC-D0014). Height: 122 cm. Published in Green, op. cit., p. 175, fig. 108. Right: the Oloko from the Lagos Museum (#LG1953.2.26).. Height: 125,5 cm. Published in Green, op. cit., p. 176, fig. 109.

Epa masked dancer with an Oloko mask, photographed by William Fagg in 1968. Published in: Fagg (William), "African Tribal Images: The Katherine White Reswick Collection", The Cleveland Museum of Art, 1968

William Buller Fagg, then Assistant Keeper of Ethnography at the British Museum, encountered this mask and another Epa sculpture at the compound of Chief Aremu Obanire in the Oke-Ede district of Ila-Orangun, some 40 kilometers from Kajola. Fagg returned in 1950 to photograph the Oloko and other Epa masks belonging to Obanire. In February 1953, Kenneth C. Murray, traveling with Fagg, purchased the *Oloko* for the collection of the National Museum, Lagos, which opened in 1957. According to museum records, Murray paid fifteen pounds sterling for the mask, acquiring at the same time a second Epa sculpture representing a warrior.

The circumstances surrounding this acquisition reflect a broader historical shift. By the 1950s, widespread conversion to Islam and Christianity had led to the abandonment of many traditional religious practices, including *Epa* masquerade, and to the destruction of associated objects. British colonial officials, operating within the framework of what was termed "salvage anthropology," sought to preserve such works by transferring them into museum collections. It was in this climate that John Danford, then the British Council's representative in Ibadan, commissioned Bámigbóyè to carve a new *Oloko* mask in 1952. Danford later loaned his collection to the University of Birmingham in 1964, where it was acquired in full in 1975.

Contemporary observers consistently emphasized the centrality of the *Oloko* within the *Epa* masquerade. The British educationalist John

Epa masked dancer, photographed by Robert Farris Thompson. Published in: "African Art and Motion - an illustrated guide to the exhibition", Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1974, p. 8

Digby Clarke, who witnessed an *Epa* performance in Omu-Aran in 1934, described the *Oloko* as the principal mask of the festival. Fagg likewise characterized it as the most important *Epa* mask in the region, noting that it represents the leopard, understood locally as "the master of the bush." In northeastern Yorubaland, the leopard was closely associated with warriors, hunters, and ultimately with kingship. Leopard skins formed part of a warrior's regalia, and oral poetry reinforced this identification. The leopard was praised above all for its strength as a fighter. Those who danced with the *Oloko* mask hence wished to absorb the animal's characteristics.

By the 1950s, *Epa* was rarely performed, but according to William Fagg there was still great respect for the *Oloko*. At Ilofa, historically a center of *Epa*, he was told that the mask could not be carried out of the shrine where it was stored without a dog first being sacrificed in its honor. Fagg also recorded that the *Oloko* was kept in a shrine with up to twenty dog skulls hanging from the ceiling. Dogs were generally sacrificed to Ogun, the god of war, and to no other deity; this practice, therefore, linked *Oloko* to Ogun. Across these accounts, *Oloko* emerges not merely as one mask among others, but as a concentrated embodiment of authority. In Bámigbóyè's hands, it became a vehicle for both adherence to tradition and sculptural invention, asserting the leopard's primacy while expanding the form into a complex statement of power, order, and social continuity.

This text was based on: Green (James), "Bámigbóyè: A Master Sculptor of the Yoruba Tradition", New Haven, Yale University Press, 2022: pp. 29-30, 75, 78, 80, 94-96, 173, 176, 185 - please consult this publication for detailed references to the cited sources.

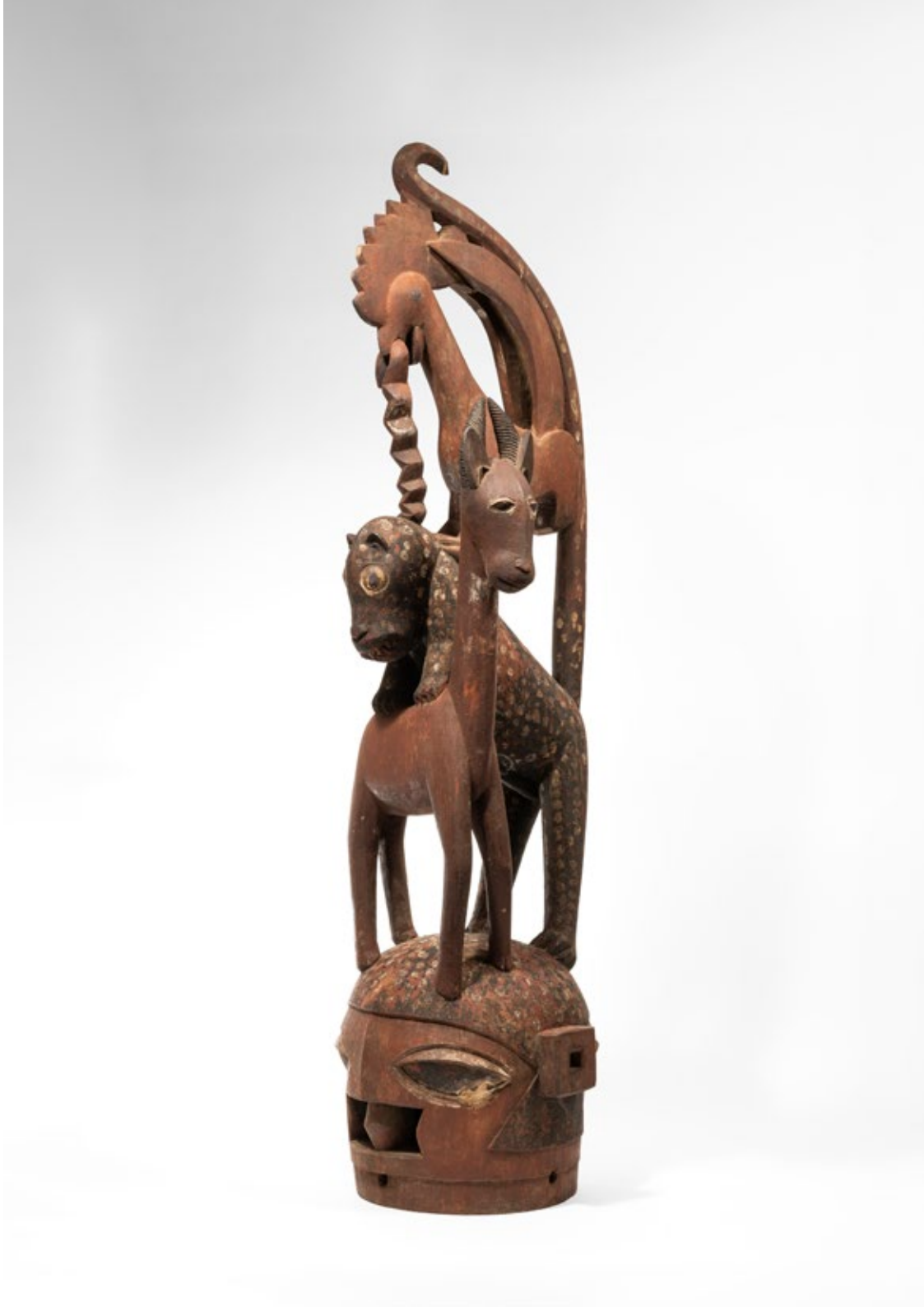
Olóko

Helmet Mask

Olóko helmet mask for an Epa festival
with a superstructure depicting a leopard,
an antelope, a rooster, and a snake.
By Moshood Olusomo Bámigbóyè,
Kajola, Kwara State, Nigeria, ca. 1920-1975.

Wood
Height: 132 cm

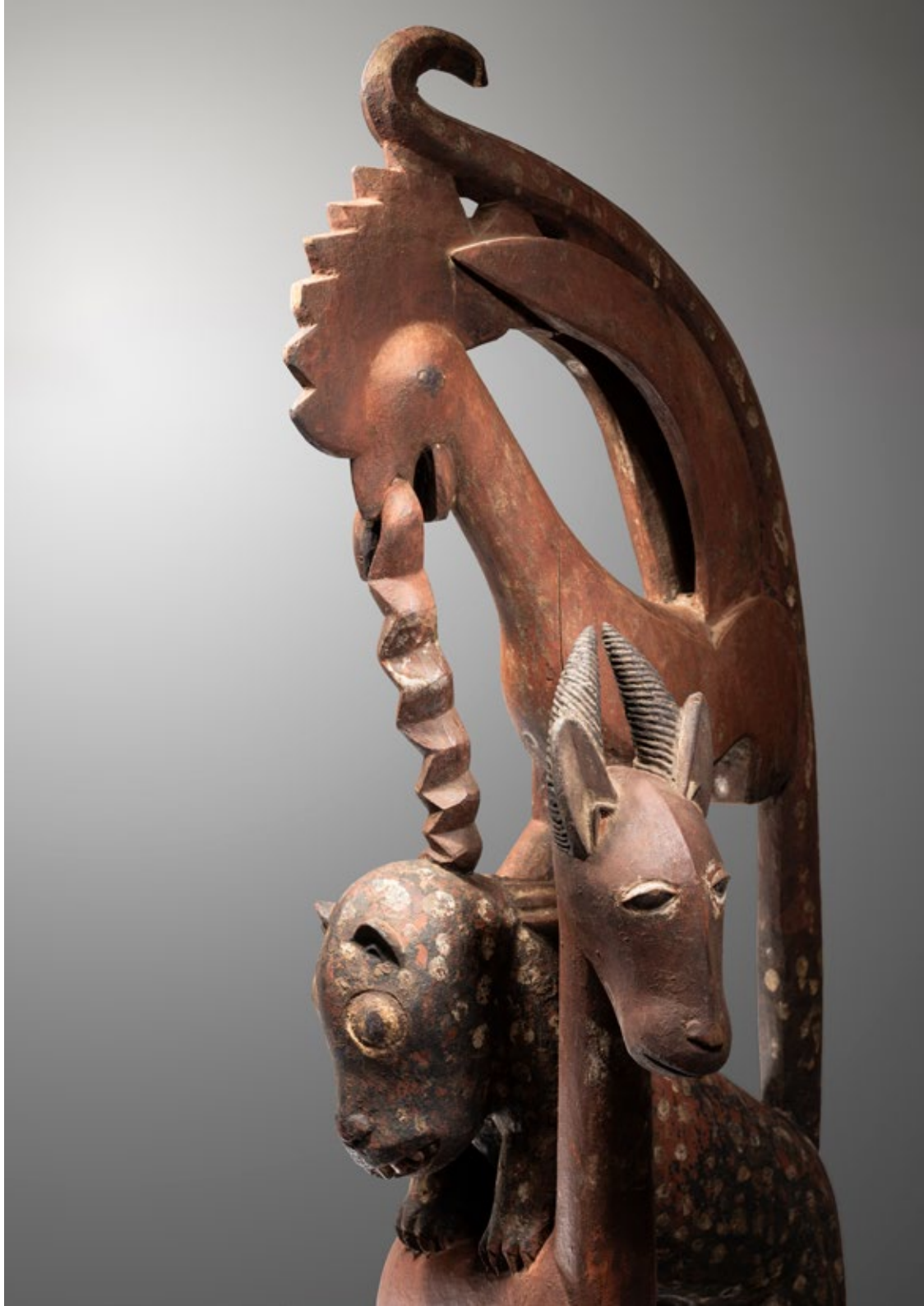
Provenance:
Abdoulaye Ousmane, Lomé, Togo.

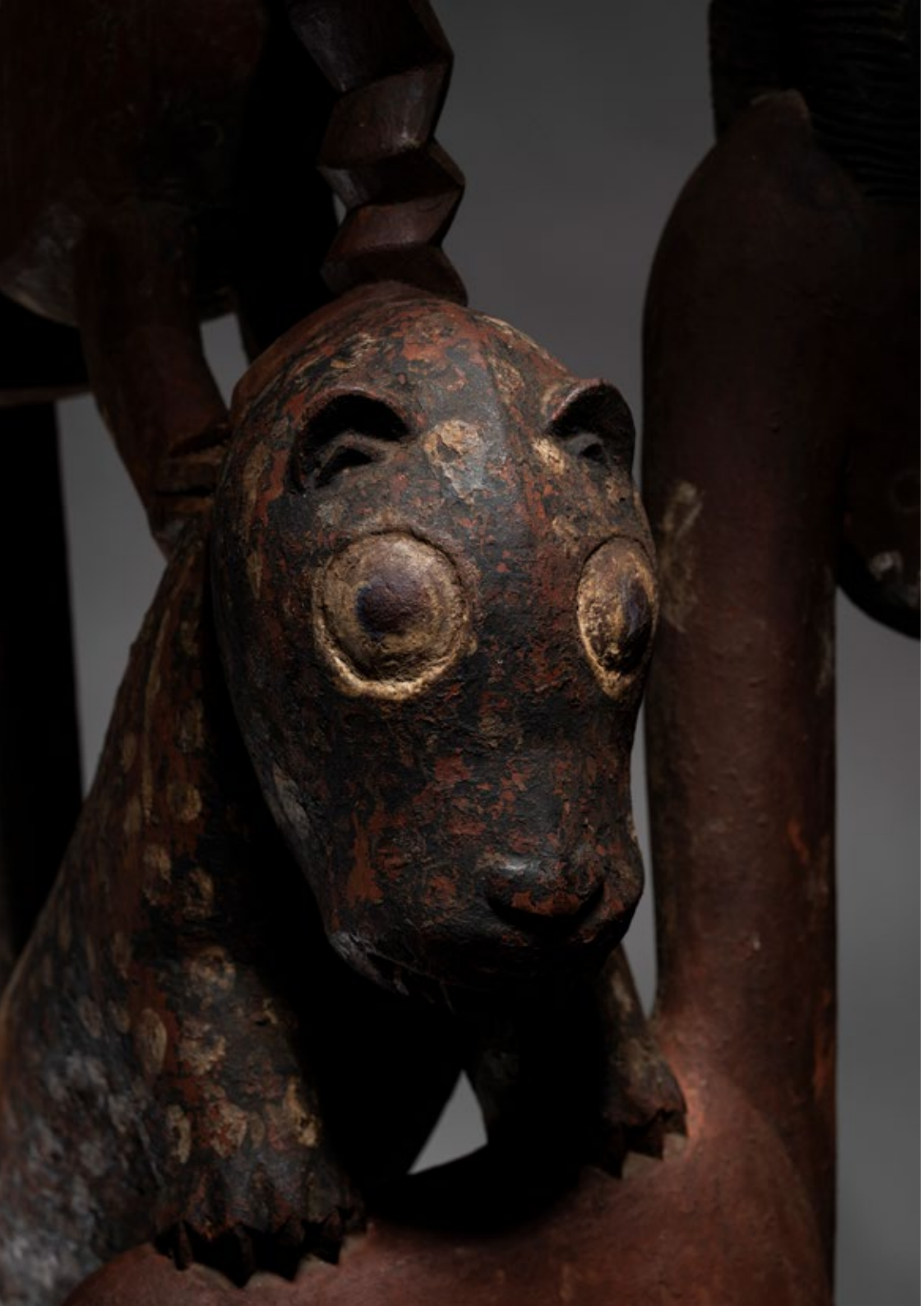


This exceptional *Oloko* mask, carved for an *Epa* festival and attributed to Bámigbóyè, exemplifies the sculptor's ability to condense a complex iconography into a single, vertically articulated form. The helmet mask itself forms the structural base. Its compact face features heavy-lidded, almond-shaped eyes and an intense expression. The domed crown, bearing remnants of pigment, testifies of repeated ritual activation. The surface bears the marks of time and handling, a patina that registers movement, sweat, and contact, evidence of a life lived in performance.

Above this foundation unfolds the sculptural core of the mask: a leopard grasping an antelope beneath it. The leopard, rendered with a taut body and pronounced, forward-facing eyes, embodies controlled aggression and authority. Its paws press firmly into the back of the antelope, establishing a moment of suspension rather than violent climax. The antelope, positioned directly underneath and slightly forward, is elongated and upright, its slender legs and poised stance lending the composition an unexpected equilibrium. Rather than collapsing under the predator's weight, it appears to hold its position, transforming the scene from a literal act of domination into a symbolic configuration of power, restraint, and potentiality.

This pairing functions as the mask's central axis. Bámigbóyè's handling here is notably economical: anatomical details are reduced to essentials, yet posture and proportion convey clarity of intent. The negative space between legs and torsos is carefully calibrated, allowing light to pass through the structure and preventing visual congestion. Crowning the composition is a rooster, depicted in an upright stance and serrated crest. It is perched above the leopard, holding a snake, rendered as a sinuous, elongated form, in its beak. The act of grasping - beak holding serpent - echoes the earlier motif of containment and control seen in the leopard and antelope. The leopard's sweeping tail rises behind these figures at the back, terminating in a subtle curl. This feature functioned as an attachment point for a live rooster, sacrificed during the performance, further binding sculptural form to ritual action.





Olóko

Helmet Mask

Olóko helmet mask for an Epa festival
with a superstructure depicting a ram.
By Moshood Olusomo Bámigbóyè, Kajola,
Kwara State, Nigeria, ca. 1920-1975.

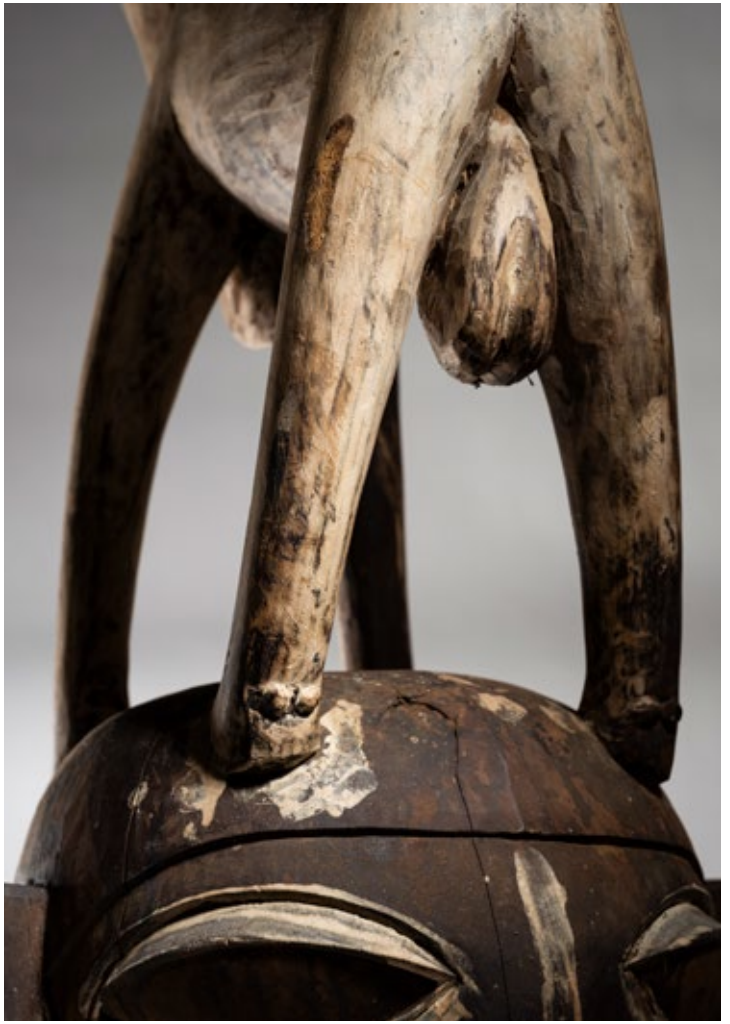
Wood
Height: 100 cm

Provenance:
Abdoulaye Ousmane, Lomé, Togo.

This unique *Epa* mask, carved for festival performance and attributed to Bámigbóyè, offers a more concentrated but no less authoritative expression of sculptural intent. Where multi-figure *Epa* compositions articulate power through narrative accumulation, this example achieves its force through singular emphasis. The mask is surmounted by a large white ram, whose presence dominates the composition both visually and symbolically.

The helmet mask at the base provides a stable and familiar foundation. Its facial features are reduced to essential elements: elongated, almond-shaped eyes set into a compact, cylindrical head and a big rectangular mouth opening. The surface bears traces of ritual wear - abrasions, pigment residues, and patina variation - that situate the object firmly within a history of use. Above the mask stands the ram, carved at a scale that commands immediate attention. The animal's body is elongated and upright, its legs firmly planted on the domed crown of the helmet, establishing a clear vertical axis. The ram's most striking feature is its large, deeply ribbed horns, which curve outward and backward in a controlled arc. Their rhythmic carving introduces both texture and movement, framing the head while echoing the broader sculptural concern with balance and counterbalance.

The pale, almost bleached surface of the ram contrasts markedly with the darker tones of the helmet below. This chromatic distinction is not merely aesthetic but structural: it visually separates realms, elevating the animal into a heightened symbolic register. The ram's posture - alert yet contained - suggests strength held in reserve rather than aggression unleashed. Anatomical details are selectively rendered; musculature is implied through volume rather than explicit modeling, reinforcing the sense of composure and dignity. The cylindrical tail rising behind the animal subtly reinforces the composition's upward thrust. It stabilizes the form while guiding the viewer's eye from the mask to the elevated animal presence above. The negative space between the ram's legs and torso is carefully managed, ensuring that the sculpture remains open and legible from multiple viewpoints. This mask stands as a compelling example of how *Epa* carving can articulate power through formal economy, and of Bamigboye's capacity to calibrate scale, surface, and proportion with assured restraint.



Olóko

Helmet Mask

Olóko helmet mask for an Epa festival
with a superstructure depicting a dog
holding its pup.
By Moshood Olusomo Bámigbóyè, Kajola,
Kwara State, Nigeria, ca. 1920-1975.

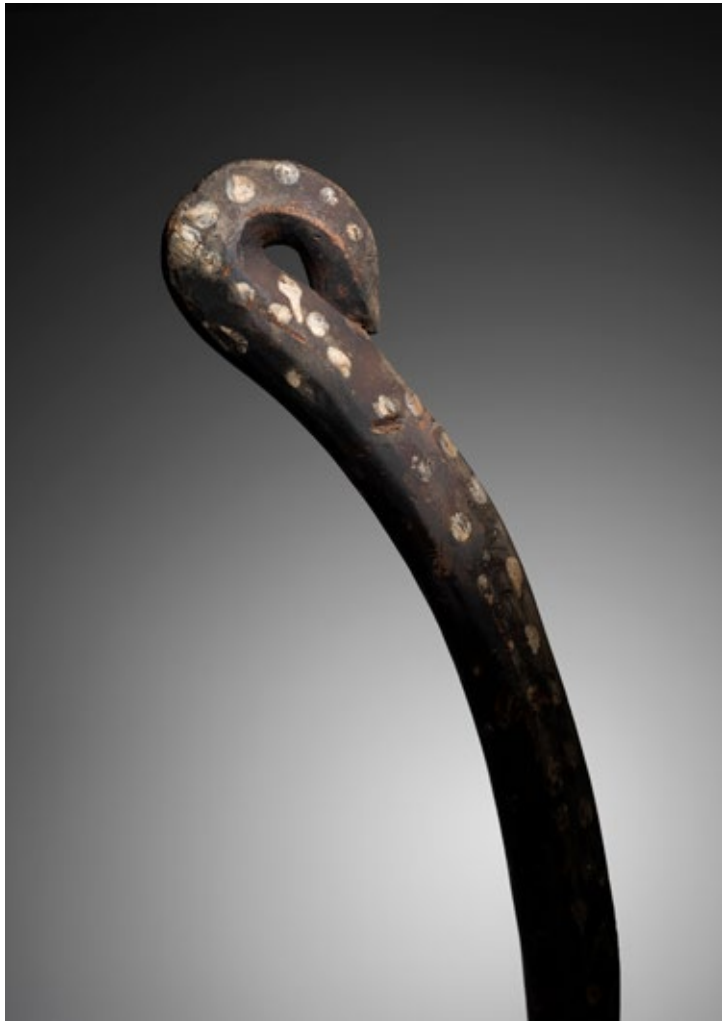
Wood
Height: 120 cm

Provenance:
Abdoulaye Ousmane, Lomé, Togo.

This monumental *Epa* mask, carved by Bámigbóyè, places a single animal figure atop its helmet: a dog bearing a pup within its mouth. The lower portion of the mask, the carved helmet, is executed with the characteristic restraint of the *Epa* tradition: a compact, nearly cylindrical form with large, softly modeled, almond-shaped eyes and a rectangular mouth opening. Its surface bears the patina of ritual use, with areas of color and abrasion that suggest repeated handling, ceremonial wear, and perhaps the accretion of offerings. Above this foundation stands the dog, its posture both alert and poised. The long, subtly elongated legs and taut body give the figure an elegant presence, while the pronounced ears and keenly carved eyes convey watchfulness. Within the animal's mouth rests a smaller animal, clearly identifiable as a pup, its presence central to the mask's visual and symbolic logic. The negative space between the dog's legs and torso has been carefully calibrated, ensuring legibility from multiple perspectives and allowing the superstructure to be read clearly in motion during performance. The elongated vertical tail rising behind the animal subtly reinforces the mask's upward thrust, guiding the viewer's gaze from the helmet's base up toward the vigilant animal above. This simple but effective compositional strategy unifies the work's parts. The

curled loop at the tip of the tail would accommodate a sacrificial rooster during performances.

In Yoruba thought, the dog occupies a privileged symbolic position that transcends its everyday role. Among domesticated animals, the dog is esteemed as a guardian and companion, associated with vigilance, loyalty, and protection. It is a traditional companion of hunters and a recognized emblematic figure in praise poetry and oral literature. Moreover, in Yoruba cosmology, specific dogs are linked to deities and mythic narratives: for example, dogs appear in lore surrounding the primordial orisha Ogun. The sculptural decision to depict the dog carrying its pup adds an additional layer of interpretive richness. Within the idiom of Yoruba symbolism, care for progeny and continuity of life are significant themes. Although direct scholarly sources on this precise iconography in Epa masks are limited, this mask being the only one of its kind known, the juxtaposition of guardian figure and offspring possibly evokes ideas of protection, lineage, and the transmission of vitality - core concerns in ritual contexts that honor ancestors and seek blessings for communal well-being. The pup, cradled yet exposed, suggests both dependence and the promise of future strength, reinforcing communal aspirations toward growth and continuity.



+32 485 98 20 36
BRUNO@DUENDEARTPROJECTS.COM
DUENDEARTPROJECTS.COM